

ORIGINS OF HEROISM IN EARLY CHILDREN'S LITERATURE

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Abstract:

This paper explores the evolving portrayal of heroism and bravery in children's literature and fairy tales, tracing its development from early moral and religious narratives to contemporary depictions grounded in emotional resilience, social justice, and inclusivity. Beginning with 17th-century texts like *A Token for Children*, where heroism was equated with piety and obedience, the essay examines how Enlightenment thought and Victorian adventure narratives gradually shifted the focus to moral autonomy, exploration, and personal growth. In the 20th and 21st centuries, literature increasingly emphasized everyday courage, empathy, and internal struggles, with works like *Charlotte's Web*, *Matilda*, and *Wonder* offering nuanced portrayals of heroism. Parallely, the cinematic evolution of fairy tales—from early silent films and Disney classics to modern, revisionist adaptations—demonstrates how heroism has been continuously redefined to reflect changing cultural values, artistic innovation, and societal shifts. Drawing on mythological and cross-cultural perspectives, the study argues that the enduring appeal of heroic narratives lies in their ability to mirror human ideals, adapt to new challenges, and inspire younger generations.

Key words: Children's literature , heroism, bravery, moral development, emotional resilience, fairy tales, mythology, cultural values

A common theme of children's literature is heroism and bravery, with characters facing adversity, fear, or injustice and responding with valor, compassion, and determination. These themes are typically simplified and romanticized to be more easily understood and relatable to young readers. Generally, heroism entails a character, frequently a child or an underdog hero, performing a heroic or selfless deed that benefits individuals, supports the right, or overcomes substantial odds. So begins one of the great friendships in literature; the kind of commitment not even death can break. This is the literary world which I grew up in, where heroes, more often than not, don't rely on brute strength to come out on top and win the day. Think Harry

Potter, or Matilda; characters whose heroism is not just physical but moral, and intelligent, and loyal. Courage is often depicted as an inner strength to address fears, be open to new experiences, or stand up for oneself or others when challenged. For instance, in *Charlotte's Web*, Wilbur discovers courage through friendship and love, while in *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*, the Pevensie siblings exhibit courage by venturing into an unfamiliar world and fighting for justice. These themes in children's literature serve to impart moral values, foster empathy, and promote resilience among young readers¹. Early children's literature, spanning the 17th to 19th centuries, emphasized moral and religious heroism, as seen in works like *A Token for Children* (1671) and *The History of Sandford and Merton* (1783), where heroism was closely linked to moral conduct, obedience, and religious virtue, encouraging children to be pious, humble, and self-sacrificing, with courage often defined as the ability to endure suffering or resist temptation. During the Victorian Era, from the mid to late 19th century, as illustrated by *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* (1865) and *Treasure Island* (1883), the concept of heroism evolved towards adventure and personal bravery, placing young characters in thrilling or fantastical scenarios where they had to rely on their intellect and moral judgment, with courage increasingly associated with exploration, resilience, and independence. In the early 20th century, literature such as *The Secret Garden* (1911) and *Peter Pan* (1911) presented characters with greater emotional depth. The notion of heroism evolved to encompass personal growth and emotional resilience, where courage transcended mere physicality to include the capacity to love, trust, and accept responsibility². Moving into the mid-to-late 20th century, following the World Wars and significant cultural changes, children's literature like *Charlotte's Web* (1952), *Matilda* (1988), and *Bridge to Terabithia* (1977) began to emphasize the themes of everyday bravery and emotional heroism. Characters faced challenges in their schools, homes, and friendships, highlighting internal struggles and moral dilemmas. In the 21st century, works such as *Wonder* (2012) and *The Hate U Give* (2017) focus on social justice, empathy, identity, and resilience, portraying heroism as inclusive and representative of diverse

backgrounds, abilities, and identities³. Courage now involves advocating for oneself and others, embracing differences, and effecting change through kindness and activism. Historically, the portrayal of heroism in early children's literature was influenced by the belief that children were inherently sinful or morally deficient, necessitating guidance and correction. Literature served as a means to instill values of obedience, piety, and humility rather than mere entertainment. In this framework, heroism was defined by moral and spiritual attributes rather than physical feats. Works like *A Token for Children* (1670) by James Janeway celebrated young boys and girls for their religious devotion, self-sacrifice, and acceptance of mortality with steadfast faith. These child 'heroes' were not depicted as conquerors or warriors but rather as miniature martyrs, lauded for their virtue and godliness, reflecting the cultural and religious values of their time. The Enlightenment period marked a shift towards a more secular and rational understanding of childhood. Philosophers such as John Locke advocated the notion that children are like blank slates, capable of being molded through education and experiences. Consequently, heroism in literature began to embody values such as reason, diligence, and personal accountability. Thomas Day's *The History of Sandford and Merton* (1783-1789) serves as a prime example of this transformation, depicting two boys – one indulged and affluent, the other impoverished yet virtuous – to illustrate that genuine heroism is rooted in self-discipline, compassion, and moral development. Narratives increasingly centered on the ethical growth of children, linking heroic deeds to social reform, empathy, and the capacity for learning and personal growth. By the early 19th century, the industrial and societal transformations of the era led to the emergence of adventure stories and domestic fiction, broadening the representation of heroism to encompass qualities such as resilience, ingenuity, and bravery in the face of adversity. Works like *The Swiss Family Robinson* (1812) and *The Fairchild Family* (1818) combined moral teachings with tales of survival, familial bonds, and exploration. While still upholding Christian values, these narratives introduced practical bravery and creative problem-solving as essential heroic attributes. Children began to be perceived as capable

protagonists rather than mere passive recipients of moral lessons. In summary, early children's literature established the foundation for contemporary notions of heroism by progressively transitioning from spiritual virtue to moral autonomy and ultimately to more dynamic, adventurous expressions of courage. Whereas early heroes were characterized by piety and obedience, these narratives sowed the seeds for the bold, self-sufficient child heroes found in later literature.

Conversely, the notion of heroism in fairy tales and myths has its roots in ancient storytelling traditions that aimed to elucidate the world, uphold cultural values, and inspire audiences. In mythological tales, heroes often epitomized the ideal human – larger than life, frequently of divine or noble lineage, and destined for greatness. Figures such as Gilgamesh from Mesopotamian epics and Heracles from Greek mythology were regarded as being favored by the gods or destiny. Their narratives often centered on grand adventures or quests that challenged their strength, virtue, and determination against supernatural entities or ethical conflicts. Myths utilized these heroes to express universal truths or the repercussions of arrogance and defiance against divine order. In contrast, fairy tales, which are rooted in oral folk traditions, typically depicted heroism through more relatable, everyday characters. These stories frequently featured humble or marginalized figures, such as orphans, peasants, or the youngest sibling, who succeeded not through brute strength, but through intelligence, kindness, or perseverance. In tales like “*Cinderella*” or “*Jack and the Beanstalk*” the hero's journey was more intimate and morally enlightening, highlighting values such as compassion, humility, and justice. Fairy tale heroes demonstrated that greatness could be attained by anyone, not solely those of noble birth. Across both myths and fairy tales, a shared structure emerged – the hero's journey. The mention of these words brings to mind the images of stepmothers, princesses, and princes, with a 'happily-ever-after' conclusion. These tales have enchanted people for years, and are still alive today. More often than not, the films that are adapted from these stories are far more elaborate and deep compared to the gentle versions that are told to kids. These films tell the story of an artistic struggle from one era to the next while adapting to technological advancements and shifts in politics and society relevant at the time.

The earliest films to portray fairy tales date back in the 19th century when most films were characterized as silent and short. The world's performing arts influenced them by adding a theatrical twist. While a majority of them mostly relied on animations, it was still a revolutionary change. These were the golden years of animations being introduced with the very first dreamy adaptations slowly being uncovered. Lotte Reiniger's silhouette animations in the 1920s capture the wondrous aspects of fairy tales using a unique and artistically vivid style. While today's standards of animation may consider these efforts rudimentary, they harnessed the ability of animation to break free from the constraints of live-action worlds and fully create original immersive fairytales. Although the impact of these films is largely overlooked, it is highly important as the foundation upon which future innovations in the genre were built. During the Golden Age of Hollywood, fairy tale adaptations received blockbuster-level productions with expensive budgets and super famous casts with rich focus on spectacle. Disney's "*Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs*" (1937) not only changed the world of animation, but also defined many norms that would be perpetuated for years to come. Disney's influence dominated, but his approach to fairy tales was overly sanitized and idealistic, stripping out the source's darker complexities⁴. At the same time, other studios produced live-action variations that retained the ambiguity and moral intricacies of the source material. This period uncovers an important tension - the pursuit of commercial success almost always meant that the narratives were streamlined and simplified; while independent or art-house productions subversively dared to go much deeper into the more daring territory. The last two decades of the 20th century saw an increase in the popularity of revisionist films based on fairy-tales. Directors began to push boundaries on the narratives, often portraying themes like feminism, oppression, or societal critique. Films such as "*The Company of Wolves*" (1984) or even "*Ella Enchanted*" (2004) surprised audiences by not only having complex females, but also depicting women who fought against patriarchal control instead of sulking into the "good and evil" trap. There was also a notable increase in dark, psychologically driven adaptations that

explored the motives of the character's psyche and the anxieties of the society that produced them. These films presented the remarkable ability of fairy tales to transcend time and serve as tools reflecting social and political issues of the modern world. Fairy tale films are more recent, but they have been known for constantly defying expectations by incorporating new genres and elements of fantasy, horror, and even romance. Movies such as *"Once Upon a Time"* (TV series) and *"Pan's Labyrinth"* (2006) exhibit the fairy tale subgenre's pliability as they incorporate elements of magical realism alongside historical fiction within complex narratives, deepening their psychological aspects. Contemporary society has also shifted, adding a focus on inclusivity and representation, such as those depicting characters of different races or challenging conventional understandings of sexuality and gender. This marks an important societal shift acknowledging more progressive ideas and attitudes that go beyond the narrow, often uniform, portrayals from the past. The development of fairy tale films is in itself the history of cinema – a timeline that is simultaneously one of technological advancement, artistic creativity, and societal evolution. The silent films of the early twentieth century and today's multi-genre masterpieces have both shaped and been shaped by society's understanding of culture and us as people. While some adaptations may still include the 'ever after' in their eloped endings, the means of achieving it are heavily tempered through complex social realities reflective of our shifting cultural ethos. That uncharted history of fairy tale films is more than just a history of film; it's a reflection. This narrative framework, popularized by mythologist Joseph Campbell, involves a hero being summoned to adventure, encountering challenges and allies, undergoing a transformative experience, and ultimately returning home changed or empowered. This pattern, along with recurring archetypes such as the noble warrior, the wise mentor, and the trickster, contributes to the universal appeal of heroism in stories, transcending diverse cultures⁵. Lastly, the portrayal of heroism is significantly shaped by cultural context. Norse mythology highlighted fatalistic courage and honor in combat, while African folklore often celebrated cleverness and communal wisdom. In Asian

narratives, harmony, duty, and spiritual understanding were pivotal in defining a hero. These variations illustrate how each culture molded its heroes to embody its distinct values, needs, and perspectives, rendering heroism a profound reflection of human aspirations and ideals throughout history.

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